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Afghan Taliban warn Baghdadi to stay out

By Tahir Khan
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Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, the second most powerful man in the Taliban hierarchy after Mullah Omar, warned IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi against possible “bloodshed”.

The Afghan Taliban finally broke their silence over the emergence of the Dai'sh or Islamic State (IS) in the country amid reports of clashes in parts of eastern Nangarhar province. Dozens of militants from both sides have reportedly died as a result.

Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, the second most powerful man in the Taliban hierarchy after Mullah Omar, warned IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi against possible “bloodshed” if those expelled by the Taliban over various crimes tried to create differences in “jihadi ranks” in the guise of IS fighters. The Taliban now await Baghdadi’s response to their letter, said a Taliban leader.

“The Islamic Emirate will then chalk out a strategy on how to deal with those who are using the name of the Islamic State to create disunity among the Mujahideen,” the Taliban leader told *The Express Tribune* on Friday.

The Taliban’s first public warning to the IS came following clashes in Nangarhar province where, Afghan officials say, IS militants beheaded at least 10 Taliban fighters this month. Officials confirmed fighting between Taliban and IS members in some districts. A Taliban leader also privately confirmed that IS has expelled Taliban fighters from some of the areas under their control.

Reinforcements

“I have received information from the region that fighting just in Khogyani district, Nangarhar claimed 80 lives from both sides,” the Taliban leader said. IS leader Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, also a former Guantanamo prisoner, also confirmed clashes with the Taliban in Nangarhar.

The clashes are so severe the Taliban have called on fighters from other neighbouring areas to fight their new rivals at a time when they have stepped up attacks on Afghan troops as well.

As mistrust about IS intensifies, the Taliban suspect the involvement of the IS in the killing of Taliban leader Maulvi Ahmad Gul Hashmi in Peshawar last Sunday. A Taliban source told *The Express Tribune* the IS leader for the region, Hafiz Saeed Khan, had threatened Hashmi days before gunmen sprayed his car with bullets.

Divide and rule

Some Afghan analysts think elements within the Afghan government are likely to encourage the IS’s inclination to take on the Taliban in a bid to pressure them to join the peace process.

Nazar Mutmaeen, an Afghan analyst who writes on Taliban-related issues, is also among those who believe officials of Afghanistan’s National Security Council may have extended “secret and indirect support” to the IS to take on the Taliban.

He said the Taliban wrote to Baghdadi to warn him that the emergence of IS could lead to another civil war as the Taliban would never allow any other group to make inroads in their areas.

“The Taliban, in their letter, want Baghdadi to publicly own or disown those who are involved in fighting the Taliban as those elements are using the name of IS,” Mutmaeen told *The Express Tribune* over the telephone from Kabul on Friday.

Jumping ship

The Taliban had earlier played down the presence of IS in Afghanistan even when senior leader Abdul Rauf Khadim, another former Guantanamo detainee, switched loyalties and pledged allegiance to Baghdadi earlier this year. Khadim was killed in a US drone strike just days after he was reportedly appointed the IS deputy for Khorasan region, which also includes Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Taliban are now concerned that commanders who are dissatisfied over the group’s policies could join the IS.

The harshly-worded nine-point letter reflects the group’s frustration at possible challenges. Mansoor, who has never issued any statement before, considers the emergence of another group as “interference” in the jihadi credentials of the Taliban and wants Baghdadi to stay away from Afghanistan. Mansoor even sought Baghdadi’s help to support the Taliban rather than expanding his ideology in the country.

“We want to emphasise that you (Baghdadi) should not focus on this danger of creating another faction. There is no need of any such group due to the existing mechanism of the Islamic Emirate. As jihad is an obligation of all Muslims, especially the Mujahideen, the Islamic State should also help in keeping the unity strong with their brothers from the Islamic Emirate based on their religious obligation,” the Taliban’s open letter reads.